



## A New Goal for America's High Schools: College Preparation for All

*Ron Haskins and James Kemple*

Disadvantaged young people in the United States have experienced declining economic opportunity in recent decades. Experts agree that the best way for disadvantaged youth to boost their income is by achieving a degree from a two-year or four-year college. Here we outline the steps high schools should take to help low-income students prepare for and succeed in college. Specifically, high schools should boost students' subject matter knowledge and study skills and counsel students on how to select colleges and obtain financial aid. To increase schools' accountability, school districts should build data tracking systems capable of following students from kindergarten through postsecondary education.

Economic inequality has been on the rise in America for more than three decades. The nation's traditional engine for promoting equality and opportunity—its public education system—has been unable to halt that upward trend despite increased public spending at the preschool, K–12, and postsecondary levels. Meanwhile, accumulating research evidence reveals

that postsecondary education has, for the past few decades, proved an increasingly powerful tool in boosting the income and economic mobility of disadvantaged students. Here we outline steps that high schools can take to increase the college readiness of poor and minority students, making it more likely that they will be accepted into and graduate from college.

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For the full report on America's high schools, edited by Cecilia Elena Rouse and James Kemple, go to [www.futureofchildren.org](http://www.futureofchildren.org).

The annual income difference between Americans with a college degree and those with a high school degree was more than \$33,000 in 2007, up from \$12,500 in 1965. More to the point, long-term intergenerational data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics show that a college degree helps disadvantaged children move up the income distribution past peers in their own generation. Adult children with parents in the bottom fifth of income, for example, nearly quadruple (from 5 percent to 19 percent) their chance of moving all the way to the top fifth by earning a college degree.

But too few poor kids get a college degree. About one-third of all youngsters from the bottom fifth of family income enter college and only 11 percent get a degree. By contrast, 80 percent of those from the top fifth enter college and well over half earn a degree.

Perhaps the primary reason that poor and minority students do not enter and graduate from college is that they are poorly prepared to do well there. The problem is especially evident in the huge gap between the academic achievement of white, Asian, and middle- and upper-income students as compared with black, Hispanic, and low-income students. And decades of educational reform aimed at reducing this gap have had, at best, modest success. Striking evidence of how few college freshmen meet even the most basic college preparation standards is provided by Jay Greene and Greg Forster of the Manhattan Institute. Defining minimum college readiness as receiving a high school diploma, taking courses required by colleges for basic academic preparedness, and demonstrating basic literacy skills, Greene and Forster report that only around 40 percent of white and Asian students were college ready by these criteria. But that figure was twice the 20 percent rate for black students and more than twice the 16 percent rate for Hispanic students.

The latest issue of *The Future of Children*, devoted to exploring how to improve America's high schools, contains several articles that touch on student preparation for postsecondary education and the world of work. An especially compelling article, written by Melissa Roderick, Jenny Nagaoka, and Vanessa Coca, of the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago, contains a careful analysis of how to measure whether students are ready for college and a host of proposals for actions high schools can take to increase their students' readiness for postsecondary education. As the Roderick article and related research and analysis make clear, recent years have seen an upsurge of support for the goal of helping all students, but especially poor, urban, and minority students, prepare for college, enter college, and earn a terminal degree. Attaining that goal, we believe, would boost economic mobility in the

United States and help the nation live up to its ideals of equality of educational and economic opportunity.

## **How to Help Disadvantaged Students Achieve College Degrees**

Researchers have put together a long list of educational outcomes, skills, and abilities that are essential for students aspiring to enter and succeed in college. Students must master academic subject matter, hone a set of behavioral skills such as study habits and time management, meet minimum college entrance requirements, pass achievement exams such as the SAT or the ACT, achieve solid high school grade point averages, and know how to select colleges and apply for student aid. In addition, school systems and targeted academic programs need monitoring and guidance mechanisms to help identify struggling students, keep all students on course to college, and support accountability systems. Thus, public policies aimed at preparing disadvantaged or at-risk students for college should make use of three primary strategies: increase students' intellectual skills and knowledge, provide help in selecting a college and working out how to pay for it, and create an accountability system that allows schools to determine whether their college preparation programs are enabling their low-income students to graduate from college.

## **Enhancing Academic Skills and Knowledge**

A major goal in improving college readiness is increasing students' knowledge and academic skills. If the nation is to take equal educational opportunity seriously, its high schools—especially its urban high schools—must increase their graduation rates. They must also offer, and get their students to enroll in and succeed in, the challenging math, English, and science courses that will enable them to perform well in college. As several papers in the new *Future of Children* issue on high schools point out, many districts and states have changed their performance standards and course requirements to include college preparatory classes and passing high-stakes tests. In tandem with these initiatives, districts, states, and even the federal government should be encouraged to devise new ways of convincing low-income students to take and work hard in tough courses. For example, one

innovative program in Texas that offered financial incentives to both students and teachers for student success in passing advanced placement courses was able to increase by 30 percent the number of students scoring above 1100 on the SAT or above 24 on the ACT and to increase by 8 percent the number of students going to college.

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The Texas pay-for-performance program is by no means the only one that interested K–12 schools could consider adopting to promote academic achievement. In fact, interventions designed to prepare disadvantaged students for college go back at least to the original Higher Education Act in 1965. Since then, both government programs and those initiated by individuals and groups in the private sector have multiplied. Some begin as early as elementary school, some involve activities in the community, some rely on summer and after-school work, some use tutoring and mentoring, and some include promises of financial aid for college. In short, it would be difficult to think of an approach to boosting the academic preparation and college readiness of disadvantaged students that has not been tried by one or more of these programs.

For more than forty years, the U.S. Department of Education has provided substantial support for a variety of college preparatory programs, including eight interventions under Project TRIO beginning in the 1960s, and, more recently, Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) and Project Graduation Really Achieves Dreams

(GRAD). Rigorous evaluations have been conducted of four of these initiatives including Upward Bound, Talent Search, GEAR UP, and Project GRAD. Though each program is different, all emphasize college-preparatory courses and tutoring or other extra preparation outside the regular class schedule. Some start as early as the elementary years, some provide scholarships, and some provide college counseling and help with financial aid. None of the evaluations, however, produced evidence that the programs boosted college graduation rates. Most evaluations also failed to find evidence that students in the programs took more college-preparatory courses, received better grades, or demonstrated higher rates of high school graduation than peers who did not participate in the programs.

Consider an example. Project GRAD, one of the best known of the programs, focuses on reading and writing, includes enhanced professional development, begins as early as elementary school, and offers scholarships to students who perform well. When Project GRAD programs in three sites (Houston, Columbus, and Atlanta) were studied by MDRC, a highly regarded research firm in New York City, the findings were discouraging. The study found some evidence of more students completing a curriculum of academic subjects in the original Houston site, but when the program was expanded to two additional schools, even this effect faded. The study found no evidence in any of the schools of elevated high school graduation rates. The respected “What Works Clearinghouse,” run by the Department of Education, concludes that Project GRAD has “no discernible effects on progressing in school or on completing school.”

Another well-known program aiming to prepare disadvantaged students for college, Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID), operates in 4,000 schools nationwide, as well as in fifteen foreign countries. AVID is taught as a regular school elective, mostly during the junior high school and senior high school years. Designed for poor and minority students, it meets for an hour each school day and conducts “enrichment” meetings outside regular school hours at least once a week. Specially trained

teachers help students learn such college study skills as how to take notes and tests and how to read textbooks and manage time. The course involves extensive writing, following a research-based sequence, as well as tutoring by college students. But the evidence that AVID improves students' college enrollment or performance is weak.

All these programs certainly seem to have all the ingredients for success. They try to augment the knowledge and scholastic skills of students; they provide extra instruction; they often provide college counseling and financial advice; they often start in the early grades; and they usually offer specialized training to staff. But despite the lofty claims of the program sponsors, evaluations show their effects to be modest at best.

It is not, however, unusual for educational programs to show modest results when they are rigorously evaluated. One reason is that promising programs often serve motivated students who are likely to do well even under challenging circumstances and the programs do not add much to what these young people would accomplish through other means. Another reason is that many demanding programs are not able to sustain participation and engagement among students who are at the highest risk of school failure. To push these programs beyond their current modest success, high schools must rethink their current efforts and adopt comprehensive strategies that encompass academic skill-building, guidance, and sustained student engagement. It is important that these strategies be adapted to local needs and circumstances, evaluated to determine how well they are doing, and then modified, as needed, in accordance with the evaluation findings. "Get started and modify based on evidence" is the motto for success.

### **Assistance in Selecting and Paying for College**

Not surprisingly, low-income and minority students, as well as students who are the first in their family to attend college, have difficulty knowing which colleges they might be able to enter, how to pick a college from among the realistic possibilities, and how to

wade through the cumbersome process of applying for federal student aid. These students can become so frustrated or intimidated that they don't apply to colleges or, if they do, they apply to schools that are not well matched to their academic skills and financial circumstances. This can lead to low college enrollment rates even among those with the best intentions of attending. Most advantaged students, by contrast, have parents who are experienced in the process of selecting colleges and can offer guidance. Many of these parents visit colleges with their children and accompany them to the college admissions office to give them a first-hand view of the campus and enable them to learn about possible courses of study. In fact, many wealthy parents hire experts whom they pay as much as \$5,000 or more to help their sons and daughters select good schools, prepare to take the college entrance tests, and meet all the qualifications for admission. But disadvantaged students often find themselves caught in a swamp of conflicting information, doubts, and the feeling that they don't quite know whether they should attend college, which colleges to consider, or whether they could get the money needed to attend. They need help.

Every high school should, therefore, have trained counselors and teachers to help these students select and apply for both college and financial aid. Without overlooking advantaged students, schools should make it a priority to help poor students select a college and apply for financial aid. Research shows that schools serving predominantly low-income and minority students have more than 1,000 students per counselor compared with the national average of about 500 students per counselor. Advising students about college preparation, college selection, and obtaining financial aid is a complex undertaking and requires specialized training and a full-time commitment. States and local school districts should do everything possible to ensure that disadvantaged students have adequate access to effective counseling beginning at least by the ninth grade. In pursuing this goal, school systems should take advantage of new and low-cost opportunities like the National College Advising Corps (NCAC). Supported by the Jack Kent Cooke and Lumina Foundations, the NCAC

now operates in thirteen states to place recent college graduates in high schools serving low-income students to work with the schools' regular guidance counselors in helping students navigate the process of applying for college and obtaining financial aid.

### **Improve Accountability**

One of the most important developments in K–12 education in the past several decades is the growing emphasis on accountability. The premise is that if schools seek to achieve a particular goal, they must devise a way to measure whether the goal is being achieved, make the findings public, and then improve their programs if they are not succeeding. To ensure accountability in preparing students for success in college, schools must create data systems that not only follow their students through the public school years but also chart their postsecondary experiences and later outcomes.

States are fully aware of the importance of accountability for postsecondary performance and have begun taking steps toward developing the necessary achievement tests and data systems. A prime mover in the attempt to build these data systems is Achieve, Inc., a bipartisan nonprofit organization formed by governors and business leaders in 1996 to help states raise academic standards while improving student assessments and strengthening accountability. In 2005, specifically to make college and employment readiness a high priority for states, Achieve established the American Diploma Project (ADP). A total of thirty-two states enrolling 85 percent of the nation's public school students are now official members of ADP and are working toward meeting its various goals, including that of creating an accountability system that covers both high school and postsecondary experiences of students.

Perhaps the most promising step taken by ADP has been to develop a data system, already adopted by nine states and being considered by thirty-eight others, that tracks the progress of students from kindergarten through college graduation. According to ADP's 2008 annual report, the data system will greatly improve assessment of how well students are staying

on track during their K–12 years and will measure more accurately the success of high schools in sending their students to postsecondary institutions and, equally important, the success of students once they arrive on campus. ADP is working with the Data Quality Campaign, the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, and the states to create the data system. But the ADP system is costly. Replacing the outdated systems now used by some states will be expensive, and getting all states to agree to adopt compatible systems will be difficult. Putting the new systems in place will likely require many years. The efficiency and timeliness of constructing the new data systems could be enhanced by even closer coordination between ADP's efforts and the federal Statewide Longitudinal Data System grant program operated by the Department of Education that now provides financial support to twenty-seven states to build longitudinal data systems.

Once in place, a comprehensive data system like the one Achieve and its collaborators are building would permit researchers to conduct studies of how specific characteristics, experiences, and performance of students in high school are related to their postsecondary achievements, especially college enrollment and graduation. The field of helping disadvantaged students succeed in college is clearly still evolving. As noted, it has not yet produced programs that are highly successful in boosting either college enrollment or graduation. Correlational studies of the type permitted by long-term data that follow students through their postsecondary experiences would inform school systems about the types of school programs and student performance that are linked with postsecondary achievement. Even better, a data system that could follow students into college would clear the way for experimental studies that can provide gold standard evidence of the success of programs in the field.

### **A Proposal**

As noted, the federal government now funds a wide range of efforts aimed at helping disadvantaged students prepare for college. Evaluations show that the programs are at best modestly successful in boosting college entry; they find no evidence that the programs

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raise college graduation rates. Together, the programs cost about \$1.7 billion a year. We recommend that the secretary of education revise the basis for selecting applicants for grants from these programs. For two years after announcement of the new selection procedure, current grantees would continue their programs. Then competition for funding would be open to public schools, postsecondary schools, non-profit and for-profit organizations, and coalitions of these organizations.

In the competition, priority would go to applicants able to show how they will track student progress in reading and math and how they will respond with additional instruction or other assistance when students fall below grade level in either subject. Priority would also go to applicants able to show how they will track their students' progress during the postsecondary years, particularly their success in entering and graduating from college. Applicants would also show how they will use the information on postsecondary progress to modify their college preparation program. Recipients would be required to reapply for funding every three years; programs that did not increase college enrollment and graduation rates would lose their funding. The education secretary would emphasize

that winning programs should also be able to show how they would avoid achieving high graduation rates or college entry or completion rates by creaming highly motivated or high-performing disadvantaged students at the time of enrollment. Preference would go to programs that have effective procedures for enrolling truly disadvantaged students and boosting their achievement and college enrollment and graduation rates. Similarly, preference would go to proposals that provide for rapid response as soon as disadvantaged students begin to fall below grade norms.

We also recommend that the Statewide Longitudinal Data System be expanded to all states while ensuring that state systems are capable of following students through the college years. In sum, the new approach we propose would be based on continuous accountability, quick response to students who fail to meet standards, and evaluation of college preparatory programs based on long-term outcomes.

## **Conclusion**

In the long run, high schools cannot be expected to increase college enrollment and graduation rates on their own. The federal government must streamline and simplify its exceptionally complex system of providing students with grant assistance, loans, and tax benefits. It must also greatly simplify the procedure by which students apply for aid. For their part, colleges themselves must make greater efforts to help disadvantaged students once they arrive on campus. But high schools should lead the way by developing college preparatory courses that are continuously evaluated for their impact on student achievement during the K–12 years and on success in college after high school graduation. And the federal government should provide more effective assistance by funding only high-quality programs that provide solid evidence that they boost college graduation rates of the truly disadvantaged and by helping states build data systems that will promote accountability for postsecondary success.

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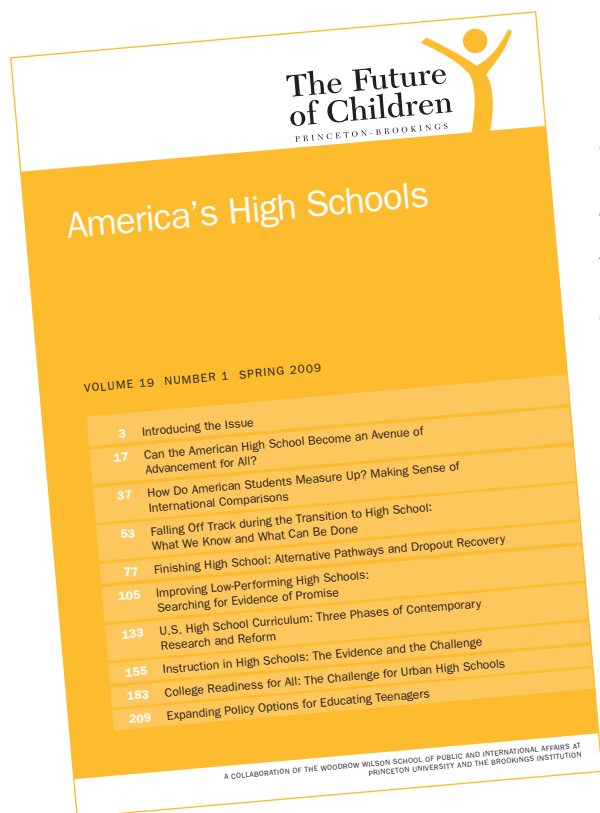
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